

MVFD Firefighter* Peter Stewart

Interviewed by Rina Faletti

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**at the time of the 2017 fires, Pete was not yet a firefighter, but aided the MVFD during the fires*



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Peter Stewart

[Abrupt start of recorded material]

Let me turn my phone off.

Okay. So first just introduce yourself and your address.

Peter Stewart, 2923 Cavedale.

Thanks. So the landscape has changed. We're taking a walk around Peter's house.

So on the second day, Tuesday, of the fires, CalFire was up here. They had men on the ground and a bulldozer. The bulldozer ripped this pathway right through here, which starts on my property and goes onto my neighbor's property -- that property right there.

What number is that one?

I'd have to look it up. That's the Cook's, Tracy and Bill (2939 Cavedale).

I see, okay.

They were very aggressive, these CalFire firefighters. They were excellent firefighters. They were down hooking up hoses to the concrete tanks that you drove past and putting out fires at my neighbor Norman's house (2933 Cavedale) and, later on, here, I believe. I had to leave at that point.

This was when? Do you remember around what time?

This was Tuesday around 2:00 PM.

In the afternoon?

Yeah. So because I had this screenshot on my phone of being the Board Vice President of Mayacamas Fire -- well, on Tuesday, there weren't even roadblocks yet, but by Wednesday, they were -- sometimes I was able to get in because I was on the Fire Board and helping. At other times, they would keep me out because I wasn't an actual firefighter yet.

So that was Tuesday. I just took some more paintings, some more pink slips and valuables, things like that, and watered down the deck one more time. Previously, having been on the Fire Board, I had cut pretty aggressively down below the house and had a strong defensible space.

"Cut" meaning?

We cut all the brush back, yeah.

So going back to the beginning of the fire -- Monday night we stayed in Healdsburg. Sunday, we left in the middle of the night and went down and stayed with my wife's boss with our dogs and cats and my daughter.

By Monday night, we really thought our house was gone because we'd been watching from Madrone Road with my neighbor, Tyler Kennedy (2775 Cavedale). We thought that both of our houses -- his is right down here -- were gone because the fire burned through here while we were watching.

But we didn't know yet that it didn't. Because of some of the airdrops and because we had defensible space, it burned through here without actually burning the house.

So my neighbor, Erich Hummler, called me Tuesday morning, and I was at work. He said, "Your house is still there." I was like, "Wow." So I came racing up here. And then later that day, when I left again, that was when I saw those guys fighting the fire at the bottom of my driveway, the CalFire guys.

So it came through here on Monday?

No, it came through here on Tuesday --

Oh I see.

-- and then again on Wednesday.

That's what I was going to ask is, "When it came again?"

Yeah. It burned my neighbor's house was [on Wednesday], I believe. Yeah, it just kept going at that point. And the bulldozer was up here trying to fight it as were some of the firefighters with the other houses I think on Wednesday.

So Sunday night, it had been super-windy. We did entertain some friends. We woke up, and we could actually see -- I'll show you from the bedroom -- we could see a fire in Nuns Canyon.

What night was this?

It was Sunday night.

Oh, the very first night.

The very first night, we could see a fire -- here -- in Nuns Canyon and then, from the living room, in Glen Ellen. We could see two different fires already going. That was maybe -- I want to say -- 3:00 in the morning, and then we packed up and left for the first time. [Laughter]

Oh my god. Here, let me turn this off.

So do you want to keep telling the story of the fire or do you want to go back to it?

Oh sure, yeah. I was saying how Tuesday the CalFire guys were fighting it very aggressively, and when I left, I was kind of fairly confident in what they were doing. And then Wednesday morning, I was at work; I sell wine for a living.

Needless to say, not a lot of people were buying wine that Wednesday morning so I jumped in the truck, and I went and called Michael Jablonowski (MVFD Asst. Chief). He said, "We could use some chainsaws, food, gas, water," and so on. So I left Santa Rosa where I was working, and I went to Friedman Brothers. The guy was very helpful. He could tell I was like kind of panicky, in a jam over this. The manager helped me gather up all this stuff. And I got the food at Broadway Market.

I went up to Station 1(3252 Trinity), and most of the guys were there.

Can you remind me what day and time this is around?

This was Wednesday morning.

Okay.

So Scott was there -- Jerry and Jesse, Anthony, Michael J., Uncle Ted (Scott Palkoski, Jerry Apgar, Jesse Apgar, Anthony Horne, Michael Jablonowski, Ted Meyer). They were all there. They were

dog-tired and grateful for the food and so forth. And then Michael said, "Now that you're here, why don't you get a coat and a hat and go with Anthony?" I was like, "Woah! -- okay."

So we went to Anthony's house -- and he was already aware of this, but the house was gone -- way back in the woods. It was a heavily-wooded area that was so different from here. The house was gone, but he still wanted to save his trailers so he would have something to live in and some other things.

So first, I was fighting it with a shovel. And then Michael came with the truck, and we started putting water on the trees. We did manage to take the trailers out of there.

Was it burning at the time?

It was still burning through those woods, yeah.

So that was literally trial-by-fire; my first experience was in the middle of this wildfire. Back in the woods, I saw some guys that I went to high school with that were paid professionals. They were having a safety meeting back in those woods.

And then the next day, I came through the roadblock and brought my neighbor, Tyler Kennedy, in with me. Manuel (702 Cavedale) from the bottom of the hill wanted me to feed his donkeys. So I brought in hay, fed the donkeys, and then came up. There were spot fires all around here still.

So I went and took a bucket, took water out of Manuel's pool, and put out a couple spot fires there. And then the same thing with Norman's house, I put out spot fires with a bucket there and then shut their windows; they had some windows open. They told me where the key was so I shut those. So I was just trying to do little things to help that day. I think that was Thursday.

There was a fire in this canyon, right here, still pretty active. I got some BLM federal firefighters up here, and they set a backfire there.

He was fascinating. This guy had fought fires everywhere from Alaska to Kentucky. He said that in an area of Kentucky, back in the woods where people were making their own moonshine, they were rolling burning tires at him during a fire because they didn't want him back in their woods. So he had some crazy stuff happen during other fires in other states.

But we had everybody here eventually. San Bruno was more on the Trinity side. We had Novato guys over here. There was a guy from Murphys, California that slept right outside our house while defending the area. There were a lot of San Francisco guys around. It was pretty amazing, the outpouring of help that we got.

And then Friday, as I was saying earlier, Allison (Ash, President MVFD Board) asked me if I could go inventory the houses from Station 1 to the county line along Trinity Rd. So I took the four-wheel drive and did that. I was fully expecting to have to give someone the bad news that their house was gone. But it just so happened that in that area, from Station 1 to the county line, all the houses were there.

I found one house with a broken window, which Uncle Ted later told me that -- I can't remember which department -- some guys had broken the window, got in the house, and actually saved the house and then left. So that was the one house that I found that was only slightly damaged.

But all the other houses were there. So that was good news to be able to give to Allison. Of course, as we know, a lot of other people got the horrible news that their house was gone or they were already aware.

But that was what I did Friday.

Where about is the county line on Cavedale?

Trinity --

Oh, you mean on Trinity? Not on Cavedale? Gotcha.

Yeah.

Okay -- to the top of the S-curve.

So I was doing it from the Station 1 to basically Petroni Vineyards and Tom LaTour Vineyards.

Okay. Right. And nothing was burned in there?

None of those houses in that area were burned even though, as we know, Chief Will Horne's house on Wall Road was burned and the houses lower down on Trinity. The house that I got married in, 2100 Trinity, was burned. I used to rent that house.

Tell that story.

Well, when we first moved back from San Francisco, I told Kirsten that I wanted to live either on Cavedale or Trinity. I just had a liking for this area. We looked in the paper, and there was a house for rent on Trinity. We rented it with our giant dog at that time; no kids.

We lived there for probably two years and got married there. Then we bought a little house in Boyes Springs. And then we felt super-cramped and decided we'd do anything to get back here. So

we bought these 10 acres and lived in a barn until we had twins. Then we built the real house.

[Laughs]

On this same property?

Yeah -- the same property.

Oh wow. What a story.

So our twins were 23 at the time of the fires. Lindsey was living at home, and she left with us to Healdsburg to stay at my mom's house and my brother's house.

Oh, they're not inside right now, but I have a 180-pound dog, a 30-pound dog, and two cats. So it was almost too much for one house. We kind of shared between my mom's house and my brother's house. With the traffic jams, the road was only open out by Petaluma and not through Kenwood.

Which road are you talking about?

You couldn't come through Kenwood to come into the Valley.

On highway 12?

Right. My daughters were both working in the Valley so it became a really bad commute. So they went and stayed with my friends, Jeff and Tina Nead down on 5th Street East at one point during the evacuation just so they could be closer to work.

We still stayed in Healdsburg. So it was a total of two weeks.

You were staying in Healdsburg? That's quite a ways away.

Yeah.

Mm-hmm. And no threats up that way? I thought there was a fire up there?

Actually, the pocket fire was burning Geyser Peak. So Healdsburg was kind of on edge but not as peril as here.

At one point, my daughter wanted to leave Healdsburg as well but we didn't. It seemed like everybody was looking for a house out at the beach. [Laughs]

Some people found them.

Yeah. So between my mom's house and my brother's house, we stayed the two weeks out there and got to know Healdsburg a little better.

I worked there anyway so it was fine.

Mm-hmm. So let's go back. You started telling me about Wednesday-forward.

Uh-huh.

You told me already, outside, about the very beginning. But let's slow that down a little bit. You've done the overview but maybe go through the details of -- you know, you said you saw the Nuns Fire.

I could see the Nuns Fire from here.

But tell me more about, how did you first even know there was a fire or find out about it? What were you doing up at 3:00 in the morning? How did that all occur?

Well, the wind was so bad that night that it kept my wife up. And then I think the glow of the fire was bright enough that when she went to the window, she looked out and could see that fire in Nuns Canyon. And then the other one, across from Triangle Auto Body in Downtown Glen Ellen, it was burning in there too.

So we went and stayed just for the morning with her boss, Eric, down on 5th Street West.

So when you were leaving, you realized you had to evacuate or that you needed to get out of here?

We thought it would be a good idea to evacuate.

What did you do? What did you take? What did you see when you were driving out?

We took the animals and -- that's the funny thing. Your mind doesn't always work that great. I took what I thought was important. But then, by Tuesday, I had forgotten the pink slips and certain paintings. And then my neighbor asked me to take his paintings and so on and so forth.

It's interesting how you don't always get it right the first time. We took what we thought was our important papers, our dogs and cats, and some clothes. I think I might have taken a suit because I have to wear a suit to work once in a while. It's funny how the mind works. [Laughter] Certain clothes we took, and certain things we didn't take.

But then on Tuesday, I got another chance when I came back.

In your mind, when you left that night, that first night, what were you thinking or talking about on what you were taking and why you were taking it? Were you saying, "Oh no. The house is going to burn down?" What were your thoughts?

We thought there was a chance that the house would burn down. And then when I left again on Tuesday, I still thought there was a chance that the house would burn down.

I mean, the first day, we were even hearing that Lasseter's house in Glen Ellen was gone; all these rumors that later turned out to be some true and some not. But I thought, "Well if the fire can get down in the Valley and go house to house like that, which it did, who knows what it could do."

Previous to this, I'd only seen a fire go house to house up in Weed, California. I had not seen it in this area.

Did you know about Santa Rosa or any of the other fires that night?

No. We just could see these fires, and we knew we should get out and get some stuff out. I think I watered down the deck. As soon as we don't have power, we don't have water so that's a problem. I think I watered down the deck with buckets.

And then during the fire, my brother bought this beautiful little Honda pump. He showed me how he could put it in his swimming pool and pump water. I thought, "Well, that's great." And then he was kind enough to let me take it. It turned out, I needed it way more than he did because he backs up to the golf course in Healdsburg so he was relatively safe.

So he had this beautiful little Honda Pump, and I brought it here. I went to Parsons Hardware, and Philip at Parsons helped me with the plumbing to adapt this pump down to a garden hose. I fired it up, and I was able to use a garden hose on my exterior by the fourth day of the fire, I think.

So either Wednesday or Thursday, I was able to use this pump and pump water, not at a great rate. But still, a garden hose at a normal rate is more comfortable than nothing. So that was kind of fun.

So I bought that pump from my brother, and now I can hook up a fire hose at my house.

I saw firehoses when I came in.

Yeah. I was going to show Kirsten how to use it, but it wasn't working correctly.

So now I can actually put water at a firehose level on my exterior if I needed to with this pump when there's no power. It made me think about having a pool too because the other three neighbors do have a pool. And the helicopter, during the firefight, was dipping off of Greg's pool (2917 Cavedale) and hitting this area with water off of Greg's pool.

So you said that you were watching from Madrone. Do you know what the timeframe was from that?

That was Monday afternoon, I believe. They only had one helicopter coming up here. And it seemed like it was taking him a long time to go down to the reservoir at SDC (Sonoma Development Center).

Is that the one we see right here?

Yeah. He was hitting that for his water and then coming up here and making drops, which was great. But it just seemed like that one helicopter was not going to be enough.

So we were watching from down there, Tyler and I, and a whole crowd of people who had been stopped, I think, there at that point.

But then Tuesday, I was able to drive up here still with no roadblocks.

One of the funny things was they ran out of sheriffs and CHPs. They started using game wardens for roadblocks. And one guy stopped me. I think I was leaving one night, and he stopped me out on Sonoma Mountain.

By this point, I'd been kind of working and kind of fighting the fire so my truck was a funny collection of stuff. But I definitely had a shotgun laying across the backseat because I was concerned about looting. And I had my boots and everything so I was kind of in fire mode.

This game warden stops me, and I'm looking at him. I thought, "Well, I don't have any illegal deer or salmon in the back seat so I'm good." He just let me go, of course. But I thought that was funny. [Laughs] So, yeah, they ran out of police and sheriffs.

But the guys from Tips Roadhouse were feeding all of the first responders. You'd see those guys. They had written on their windshields like special exemptions to go through the blockades. Those guys were very well-respected by all the first responders because they were feeding a ton of them down at the -- I think it was at the CalFire station.

One day when I went to bring food in, I was not allowed in. We just left our food with Bennett Valley Fire Station. They were very gracious.

Subsequently, I had been on the Board for four years now, and I was Vice President of the Board at the time of the fire. It felt like, "once my house was still here, I wanted to give more." So I went to

Fire Academy at the Santa Rosa Junior College (JC), at this advanced age. It was really fun. I did the Wildland Volunteer Fire Class at the JC from January to March.

Of this year?

Of this year.

My classmates ranged from 18 to 70. It was an amazing group of people.

Men and women?

Yes. An amazing group of people; a full class of 30 people, and 28 graduated. But I had already started attending the training drills at the firehouse.

Before the fire?

No, between the fire and the JC.

I see, okay.

So then I graduated fire academy out of the JC. Then I got my beeper, and I got my turnouts. Now, I'm volunteer firefighting.

Oh that's fantastic.

Yeah.

Are there any requirements besides that class that you have to do?

There are two different main classes. Structure Fire is like the plumbing of the fire and fighting a fire inside a house. That's the one suit that's heavier. That's the class I didn't take.

The Wildland Fire is the lighter suit that is your other set of turnouts. That's the class I did take. This one's a little more academic. It includes CPR and hazmat and confined spaces. So more test testing and more book learning -- the Structure Fire Class is more hands-on.

So after I graduated from the Wildland Fire Class, I realized, "I don't know if I'll have time to do the structure class. I'll just try and learn as I go on the twice-a-month drills at the firehouse," which I've been doing, like asking more questions about the plumbing and some of the stuff that I'm not as comfortable with, mostly having to do with the Structure Class because I had the Wildland Class.

That's pretty cool.

It's pretty cool, yeah. I had classmates from Sonoma Valley, Mountain VFD, which is above Calistoga Road. I had some from Wilmar VFD, which is West Petaluma; San Antonio, which is South Petaluma; Lakeville, which is East Petaluma. I had three guys in my class from Fort Ross VFD way up on the coast.

That was most of it. Most of my classmates were in those departments.

And which college is this?

Santa Rosa.

Oh, at Santa Rosa?

Yeah. There's a public safety campus which is for police and fire and EMT academis, out by the airport, a specialized campus.

So you looked for that and found it? Or you already knew about the class?

When I joined the department, they got me into the class.

Got it.

They put me through a very rigorous physical at Kaiser, which I had to pass to get into the class. And then there's an office at the county where they give you all the turnouts and everything, a voucher for boots. It's very complete -- new gloves. And then the instructors are either professionals or former professionals.

Oh, the funny thing about that campus is they line up the police cadets at about quarter to eight in the morning and start marching them around the quad, military style. At that point, the fire candidates are just looking at each other kind of glad that "we're not police." [Laughter]

Well, that's great. Thank you for doing that.

Yeah. I mean, we don't get a lot of calls up here so I don't have a lot of experience yet. But having started during the fires --

It sounds like you got a lot of experience during the fire.

I got some experience, yeah. We've had -- nothing much happened. Of course, if I'm at work, I can't respond. We had a car fire a few weeks ago that I just completely missed.

But we have grown since the fires, from six of us to twelve. It's a lot more energy, and it feels good to be a department with some new blood and some good energy. We changed captains too because the Chief's house (Will Horne) burned, and he moved to Mendocino -- I mean, we changed the chiefs. Michael Jablonowski, who was Assistant Chief became Chief. I enjoy working with Michael; that's been great.

So you are in an unusual position since you were already on the Board for four years.

Yes.

And then it sounds like, what you were saying, with the saving of your home, that's when you decided to go ahead and dedicate your time to volunteering. But you've been a volunteer kind of on both ends.

Yeah. I had been volunteering my time, but I just decided to take it a step further. I volunteer my time already with the Boys & Girls Club, coaching basketball, and being on the Board. Those are my two main volunteer efforts.

So for the interest of people like myself who don't know -- I know a lot more after interviewing people on what happens on the firefighters' side but not on the Board side. Tell me a little bit about what the Board does, what your duties were on the Board, and what kind of involvement you had?

Yeah. So the Board meets once a month, and it has to do usually with taking a report from the Chief. The Chief sits with the Board at their meetings and gives a report. Then we do budgetary stuff, what we're going to do with our monies. And then the once-a-year auction is a big effort so that takes months of planning and a whole subcommittee, which I sat on for a couple years.

Now, we interact with the Fire Safe Council who's a newer, created group that works in conjunction with the Board. But that didn't exist until this year.

So the Board is a once-a-month meeting, emails going around. The auction is a whole other thing that I worked on. And then the picnic is another thing that the Board works on.

The fire did change everything for the Board too because a lot of people donated money, and all of a sudden, the department has more money. And then the auction was better attended. The auction was a bigger success than it had been pre-fire. The unfortunate part is there were a lot of people there with no house. That was the sad part.

It seemed like after the fires, every day I would learn about someone else, either a friend of mine or an acquaintance, who had lost their home, a winery owner or a bar owner or just of all the people that I knew in my various careers and from going to high school here. I knew a lot of people who lost their home, and that's hard.

When you came back up here those first couple days, it sounds like Tuesday might have been the first day you came back up?

Tuesday, yes.

Describe a little bit of what you saw, heard or even smelled? What was your response?

Well, there was no power so it was pretty quiet. I went through and videoed my whole house for insurance purposes, which I hadn't done Sunday night; that was another thing I had forgotten to do. I went and took a video, in semi-dark because there was no power, of all the rooms just so I would roughly know what happened if it did burn down.

And then there was a water tender operator that had stopped my wife and my daughter, Lindsey, from coming into the driveway. They called me and said, "You know, you need to get out again." So that was when I left and when I saw those really young, in-shape firefighters from CalFire fighting the fire down at Norman's house. They had a bulldozer out and were getting ready to do that too.

There was active fire all around?

All around, yeah.

Did you hear the fire? Was there a sound of fire?

Just the snap and crackle of leaves. It wasn't like a roar like when it crowned in some areas and went tree-top to tree-top. At this point, it was mostly on the ground coming through the manzanitas and stuff like that. It wasn't that loud. There were some planes in the air, and there were some helicopters in the air. But it wasn't that loud at that point.

Back in the woods, it already had burned through there once, and it was still kind of spot fires back in the woods. When I was on Wall Road, it was a little bit eerie, I'd say.

And then I'd go out to Healdsburg, and I'd see the pocket fire burning north of there. They were coming through there with planes and so forth.

So that was about it.

You said you saw the helicopters dropping water. Did you ever see when the retardant planes came over?

I saw that the road was pink down by Petroni's. I never saw the actual drop because I had a friend that was -- I think he's CalFire. I had his cell phone. I called him when they had these spot fires out here, and he sent someone to help me. He's a captain, I believe, with CalFire. He said, "Oh, we're getting ready to burn this canyon on purpose down here between Petroni's and Moon Mountain Road.

So they were going to do a backfire down there, which they did successfully. So I talked to him maybe a day later. He said, "That went pretty well." Because the way they burned that canyon prevented the spread of maybe burning all the houses or some of the houses on Moon Mountain, for instance.

But that was an intentional backfire.

Mm-hmm. How long has this house been here?

Twenty-three years.

Oh, 23 years -- a long time.

Yeah.

And you mentioned earlier that you had already done some clearing around your house. Before this fire, what were your thoughts and fears and preparations about fire, in general, not knowing of course that we would fast-forward and have this fire?

Yeah -- because I was here during the 1996 fire. That fire started right above my driveway. It burned the Ponsford home (2837 Cavedale) and then burned over towards Napa.

But I was here. I was one of the first ones here on that day. I was lifting weights at Parkpoint, which, at the time, had a window facing this mountain. And all of a sudden, I could see smoke pretty much where my house was. So I jumped in the car and drove up here. I got here, and it was just getting started.

On that one, they brought some inmates. Of course, all the local firefighters came. But they brought some inmates. And -- let's see -- that was a July fire. So right around sunset, the inmates stopped the fire as it came through that canyon that you drove through, towards my house. I could hear the inmates up in the woods yelling and congratulating each other. It was pretty moving.

Then the fire went that way and burned like 2,000 acres towards Napa.

So I've had a good fire awareness for a long time now. And with that fire, I actually wound up in court against my will because PG&E had claimed that Davey Tree trimmed the trees and that that was the source of the fire. What I saw was that the fire started very near the Ponsford's home and was probably stemming from an exploding transformer.

So PG&E and Davey Tree went to court with each other. A private detective found out that I was a witness and came and talked to me, subpoenaed me, and made me go to court. I didn't really want to spend my time deciding who wins between Davey Tree and PG&E even though I thought PG&E was at fault.

And then, in the case, Davey Tree lost. So PG&E's lawyer beat them even though I thought it was the wrong verdict after all of that. I had to go testify in front of this jury maybe a couple years after that fire. It took a long time to sort that out because PG&E went bankrupt, I believe at that point.

Anyway, I had to go to court over that fire so that was a lesser fire that I was part of.

So I had the awareness to trim pretty aggressively down below my house. Even though I've still learned more about being fire safe since the fires, there were other details that I did not know.

What are some of those?

One was that your air ducts -- if you have a metal breathing space in your foundation, then an ember can get in there and just stick itself in that small space or burn until it's smaller and then go under your house and start burning your house.

So they're now recommending a double-sided air duct that doesn't allow that, which I have not installed yet. I still have the old typical mesh air thing over your crawl space.

Have you found those?

I haven't looked for them yet.

But you heard about it? Or it was part of your training?

No, I heard about it at a Fire Safe Council meeting.

But, yeah. That particular item wasn't part of my training. There were plenty of other ones that were. We studied that fire in [Naha], San Diego County that killed a Novato firefighter and the details of that.

There were certain things that I knew about like "being able to go into a house if it's burning all around, waiting until the house starts burning, and then leaving into what they call the black," which is the already-burned area. In an extreme circumstance, you could do that.

Probably, most people don't know that, right?

I don't know.

Yeah. The reason I say that is because 49 people or whatever died mostly in Santa Rosa. You wonder --

Yeah. Well, there were various things. I think one was trying to save their animals. Some were elderly and weren't ambulatory. Our guy here on Cavedale Road, I think he had some dementia, various reasons.

But, yeah. I guess a lot of regular --

I mean, I wouldn't think of that -- that "I should stay in a burning house."

Yeah. It is counterintuitive, right?

Yeah. But then I've also thought -- as an aside -- as I'm sure we also all have in our post-fire minds about, "What would I do if I had to escape, and it was closer to my house up here on the mountain?"

Yeah. Or what would you do if you're cut off? I mean, it's not comfortable, but you can go into the area that's already burned, depending on the temperature, and live through it by being what they call 'in the black', which is the already burned area. It depends how recently it went through there, but it's a better option.

And "where you are."

Yeah. I see basketball courts -- like I have -- at other people's houses on Riebli Road, Santa Rosa. The basketball court is a safe zone because it can only burn right up to there. So that's another place you could take your refuge besides a pool or some of the obvious ones.

This question applies to you being on the Board. What kind of fire planning actually was going on in the fire department or goes on continuously in advance of this fire, which, of course, we couldn't predict but probably could have imagined?

Well, the Board and now the Fire Safe Council and the firefighters are always encouraging people to do the right thing with regards to your foliage around your house and your water situation and that sort of thing. That's a constant effort.

And then Chief Horne had warned us that after the drought and then the heavy rains, we had a bad recipe -- drought, heavy rains, high grass. The place hasn't burned in 50 years. All of that was a bad recipe for what was to come.

My friends had bought the original Spreckels home in Sobre Vista in 1964. He moved here during the '64 fire that burned all the way from Calistoga to Boyes Springs. So I was aware of the history of the place burning. They described that to me.

-- about what the '64 fire was like?

-- what it looked like to them. While they were moving in, it was burning.

What do you remember about what they told you about the 1964 fire?

Just that it burned all the way from Calistoga to Boyes Springs, and that they were watching it from their home as they were moving in. They had just bought that home.

I think in fire academy, they might have shown too an overlay of how it came through Fountain Grove and down into the highway and across to Coffee Park, the wind patterns and stuff like that. I think that's what we were studying at the time.

My admin person at work did lose her home in Coffee Park too. That was my only actual work colleague that lost her home. She is rebuilding, and it's starting right now. She got one of the bigger builders that gives you a choice of the floor plan. They come through and build all of Type A and then all of Type B and then all of C and so on. So her house is just starting right now.

I wondered about that because I drove through there. I've driven through Coffee Park several times since the fires and noticed recently that it appeared -- I had that question because I saw a whole bunch of houses going up all at the same time but in a variety of different places. I wondered if there was a master plan of some kind.

Some of the bigger builders are doing it that way.

I drive through Larkfield almost every day. It's encouraging to see how many houses are being framed out now. Because I sell wine to Molsberry Market, which is the market that's right there. They were hurt by the fires because so many of their customers were gone.

They benefited from the new hospital being right there so they're busy during the daytime. But in the evening, virtually the whole neighborhood is gone so they were hurt by it.

You were driving from -- well, wait. How long were you in Sonoma? And then, when did you move to Healdsburg?

You mean during the fires?

On Monday night.

On Monday night, we moved into Healdsburg with my mom and my brother.

Oh, you went to Healdsburg right away?

Yeah.

Oh, did that mean you were coming back and forth? What I'm trying to get at is you must have had more consciousness than most people did at that time about the whole span of the fire, the Nuns Fire and the Tubbs Fire.

Oh sure. As I went up 101, I could see the Hyatt and the Hilton gone and parts of Fountain Grove gone. I didn't see Coffee Park until later. But, yeah. I was aware of the scope of it.

Which way did you go to get to Healdsburg that night?

The first night?

Yeah.

We both went to -- let's see.

It was 3:00 in the morning.

Oh, no. First, we were in Sonoma at my wife's boss's house.

That's what I thought you said, yeah.

But then, from there, when I came out here to Madrone Road to look at the fire, everybody was going that way on Arnold Drive. So I think you had to leave the Valley that way already. I think Kenwood was already closed at that point.

Mm-hmm -- the first night of the fire?

The very first day, yeah.

But I was just curious when you first drove up 101 --

It was that afternoon --

-- and got your first --

No, my wife and daughter went there with the animals first. I didn't get there until that night. And then, that night, we told our other daughter who was still at UCLA that we thought our house was gone. That was a hard conversation. We had to leave Healdsburg because cell phones weren't working there. We drove down to Windsor and told our daughter, "We're not sure, but we think our house is a goner."

And then the next morning, that was when Eric called me and told me, "Your house is still there, and you did a good job clearing below it. I saw it." That's when I came here, immediately myself, at that point.

So when you were driving through the Santa Rosa area that first day -- Monday night it would have been -- did you still see the fire burning up there?

No, it was in the distance. I think I was seeing the fire burning at Geysler Peak, in that area, but not actually in Santa Rosa. It had settled down I think at that point.

Mm-hmm. I was just curious because I think most people didn't have that kind of drive that early in the fires.

I think I didn't leave here until dark. By the next day, I could see the Kmart burned, the Hilton, the Hyatt, that whole neighborhood of Larkfield. It was apparent by then the scope of how devastating it was.

Yeah. What do you know about how firefighters and/or the Board communicated during the fires and what role that played?

Mm-hmm. Cell phone reception was spotty. Michael said it was best to text him. That was apparently a good idea, which I did text him. Allison (Ash) and Marc (Schwager), they live at 3200 Cavedale, were really good communicators on NextDoor. Many of us were looking at NextDoor because they were giving out a lot of important details on that site.

I just tried to stay in touch with my family. My wife was commuting to Marin from Healdsburg, and then my dogs were in an unfamiliar place and all that stuff. So we'd walk the dogs around Healdsburg at night and try and have a somewhat life, have a martini with my mom and have dinner with somebody, either my brother, his wife and children with my mom.

Our cell phones didn't work in Healdsburg at all for a few days. But over here, it seemed like we could text and call people. People were on Facebook saying, "Are you all right?" There was a lot of that back and forth.

Mm-hmm. Did your daughter come up or she stayed down in L.A.?

She stayed. Lindsey was living with us, working for an educational software company. Oh no, wait a minute. She did come back because she was working at The Red Grape. She was just there for a couple days, the night of the fire. She came back, and she was working at The Red Grape. That's when she stayed with my friends on 5th Street East, as did Lindsey who was doing the educational software.

Now, Lindsey has moved out and still does the software job and is working on her Masters in literature.

Congratulations.

Yeah. And Anna is working in San Francisco. Now, we're just the animals and ourselves.

[Laughter]

How did you see your daughters and your wife responding to the fires?

We were all stressed. It was a stressful time. We just tried to get through it. To learn that our house was still there, that was a huge relief, of course. But once we thought that our house was still going to be here and not get burned, it was a huge relief because that's a whole other thing.

I mean, if we had to look for a new home, that's so much more to think about. That was a big turning point when the house was still here, and we had a pretty good idea that it was going to remain. Even though, it was not over until -- I don't know -- I guess by like Thursday or Friday, it was mostly over.

I was underinsured, like a lot of people. I realized that and corrected it since then. I mean, people whose houses burned, it's so much work. It's like you're an unpaid contractor for two years. We'd already built our house once so I knew how difficult it could be to get through the county and all those processes.

And those have really started recently, right? I mean, the rebuilding of people's homes, it's kind of new.

Some are pretty far along. I've seen some in Riebli Road that are almost in move-in condition.

Great.

Yeah. They're doing really well.

Yeah. Now, we're getting almost to a year out.

Yeah. I've seen some in Coffee Park and some in Riebli Road that are either in move-in condition or close to it.

I mean, as I was mentioning, this bar owner, I found out, he lost his house or that winery owner. And then my dermatologist -- as a fair-skinned person, that I give regular business to -- he lost his house. So it was just more and more news of those that had lost their homes. That was hard.

Do you have any moments that you felt were like a personal or a professional meaning in your relationship with the department and the Board Meeting, like really successful moments or moments when you felt like you really helped or that you felt a good feeling about during the fires?

Yeah. That first time that Michael told me to go put a helmet and a coat on and I went to help Anthony, I felt very exhilarated. I felt like I had helped. And then in the ensuing days when I put out spot fires for my neighbors and fed the donkeys and all that good stuff, I felt like I was helping. It did make me happy and exhilarated to be contributing at that point.

Now that I'm trained, I feel that I'm contributing as well in that regard.

What do you feel like you're contributing?

Just the community, community safety and well-being, I guess you'd say, and giving something back to the community. Here, we're far more likely to have a bicycle accident or a small wildland fire than most things. But you never know what's going to happen with the fire department.

Obviously.

Yeah. I mean, we are trained, as I said, on hazmat and confined spaces and stuff that you don't see too much of here. But at least, you never know when the training is not going to be for nothing.

[Laughter]

No, you want that training.

One of my classmates was a woman who was working at The Girl & The Fig. She got hired as a professional during my volunteer class, which is rare and awesome. She got hired by Rohnert Park who is one of those unusual departments where they're trained as police and fire and they do both.

So I think she's in the police academy now. She's going to be at Rohnert Park police and fire. So that was a great moment for our class.

Yeah. That's really cool. Do you and your family talk about what your losses are? Yes, you saved your house but --

Oh yeah. That's a whole other thing that's fascinating. We had all of our land burned, our dog house -- that's how close it came; one of the firefighters had broken apart our doghouse, and it was in embers and pieces because he stopped it from advancing further -- all of our irrigation. Our roof was kind of blown up.

So, yeah, there's still an insurance claim even though the house is still here. That was an interesting process. It's a hassle. But, in general, they were pretty fair. They allowed us to get our clothes cleaned and cleaned the inside of the house. I'd say, in general, they were pretty fair, but there are a couple details that I'm still having to wrestle them over where I didn't feel like I was compensated fairly.

So I'm still working on that one.

What were the top things that you had to spend time on or get recovery for?

After the fires? I could have hired other people, but I was wanting to do it myself. I went out there and chain-sawed, raked, and cut a lot of dead stuff out and burned it. I burned three huge piles of dead stuff that I had cut out. I still have another one out there right now that it got too late in the season to do a controlled burn.

So I spent hours out there doing that before I even put the irrigation in, new, and all the other stuff.

So you put your irrigation in? Is there anything to irrigate?

Yes. Some of my landscaping right around my house survived. Then the insurance did give me money for the burned trees, and I put in some new trees. And then in some places, I chose to put a shrub where I used to have a tree just for fire safety, now having been more trained.

So you've replanted already?

Yes, not entirely.

No, but in some places?

Yeah.

And those are thriving?

Yeah.

That's great.

It's fascinating on what does survive. Marc (Schwager) was talking about how those morning glories are growing all over the mountain. And then some of the bad stuff, the rattlesnakes and the poison oaks, survived just fine. [Laughter] I already killed a really big rattlesnake right outside my front door this year. With dogs, I can't let them go because I've had one of my dogs bitten twice.

Did it survive?

He did.

He got really sick?

His head blew up so big that I thought it was going to pop. He survived; Doctor Wagner fixed him up. And then he got bit again. The second time, it wasn't as bad because he was kind of immune. But he was a bloodhound, a hunting dog.

So I don't let the rattlesnakes go near my house. I had a big one about 20 feet from the front door about two months ago.

So then some other things like where a tree burned and then it came back really nicely at the bottom. There's one tree out there that my painter gave me when I first moved. It's by the barn up here. It was a seedling, and now it's a big, beautiful, Italian stone pine. It mostly burned, but the top is green so I'm going to salvage it, I think.

So there were a few instances where I was able to hang onto some trees. But a lot of the stuff, I've just cut out and burned. It was a fair amount of work, even with the house still here, the things associated with the fire.

Mm-hmm. And you've watched neighbors and friends go through similar types of things. Any stories that you can relate about Cavedale or Trinity, about people and their recovery efforts or anything?

Well, as I said, my admin person at work, her house is gone in Coffee Park. She moved to a rental in Rohnert Park and is now rebuilding. So I've seen her process, seen her grieving, and now recovering.

I had friends whose home burned in Kenwood. They were seniors, and they had money. They immediately just bought a home in Sonoma, and they had a pretty good attitude overall about it.

She told me, "I didn't need a formal living room. I didn't need that big old house. We just bought a house in Sonoma." So it's a good thing that they had the money to do that. That's great.

But they attended our auction the other night. I saw them, and it was very emotional. She was still pretty hurt by the whole thing even though she's got this new house and has recovered rather nicely. They were Kenwood people, not necessarily from our fire district.

No, that's okay.

But, yeah. There are people still struggling to get contractors up here because there's a shortage. I've been told that they'll tell homeowners up here, "Hey, it's too far. I get plenty of work down in the Valley floor." So even if people are ready to rebuild, they have trouble getting the right workers, engineers, and contractors.

Mm-hmm. You mentioned your co-worker who lost the place in Coffee Park. You said that you've watched her grieving and now recovery. We're not in the middle of it anymore; we're out beyond it now by several months, almost a year. How do you characterize that grieving process that she went through, losing her place, and actually that whole entire area?

Her whole neighborhood, yeah.

Yeah. It's not just her in that particular incidence. It's the whole entire miles of homes. Can you comment on it? If you can't, it's okay.

Well, she was usually depressed a lot and having to work on stuff with the insurance and the county and so on. I mean, I think one small positive thing about the whole timing of it is that real estate is still on the upswing. At least, her home is rising in value as she is rebuilding it.

If we were on a down-cycle and your house was losing value while you were going to rebuild it, then you don't even really know what you have value-wise. And that would hurt even worse. But at least, the real estate market is rising.

I sell wine to 60 restaurants, 10 stores, and 7 Internet guys. My territory is Healdsburg, Santa Rosa, and Sebastopol. That's where my customers are. I've seen other secondary effects such as rents just going up and up and restaurant people being displaced, not by the fire itself but by rising rents and the real estate situation.

Some of my friends have had their rents raised to the point where they had to move. So there has been all kinds of economic secondary effects that are continuing I guess you'd say.

Yeah, I can see that you see it from a variety of points of view. And you probably experienced it from a variety of points of view too.

Mm-hmm.

That's valuable.

So almost everybody that I've talked to talks about this, as one does with major events, as being like "before the fire" and "after the fire."

Yeah.

That indicates that this is a major life-changing event. You know, there are moments in life when everything changes and "it'll never be the same again." I'm wondering what your reflections are about that and how the fires have affected you or bigger than you in that way?

Yeah. It changed my life to the extent that I went back to school and became a firefighter. That's a big change. I was not thinking about going back to school before that; so lots of changes.

Even right after the fire, the basketball team that I coached at the Boys & Girls Club had to have I think three games in one week because we had taken a break during the fires. Then we had to compress the season down. So it created all sorts of scheduling hurry-ups.

But, yeah. Like you said, most people that have lived through it kind of think in terms of before and after in some ways.

How about it from the personal point of view like what one values? Did the fire affect your values in any way or your family values or things that you value, thoughts about what's important?

Well, one of the funny things was when we got to Healdsburg. Because we have two paintings by the same artist, Lindsey said, "I liked the other one better," [laughter] -- you know, the one that I left here. So I was laughing.

But we were just grateful to have our stuff. It would be, as I said, a whole different story if we happened to rebuild from scratch. That first day, I went and bought a belt at the store because I didn't take the right colored belt. And at that point, I thought that was the start of buying a lot of stuff to replace my belongings. I didn't know that I still had a house. So that's a very awful feeling to think about losing everything.

But I do want to put a pool in to swim in and as fire protection, even though it's a very expensive proposition. I think it has intensified fire awareness for everybody even down in the Valley where they did not think that it could happen to them.

That was the shocking part to have it go house to house down in the Valley. Up here, you kind of know your danger zone or you should know it. But down there, I don't think they thought about it so much.

What do you mean going house to house? Oh, you mean the fire moving from house to house?

When the fire gets so hot, it's able to jump from house to house, and no one in the neighborhood is spared. That's a shocking thing. Like I said, I had seen that first in Weed, California but nowhere around here.

When you get that heat -- it's so intense -- that the neighbor's house just can't stop -- if there was a major firefighting force, they might be able to go four-doors down and make it stand down there. But once that heat gets really intense and starts going -- it depends how close the houses are -- in a trapped situation, boom, one after the other.

Yeah. That was catastrophic, wasn't it?

And Michael -- or was it Ted? -- was down in Kenwood, and it's hard. People, clearly, got emotional. I mean, their houses were burning. He said people were yelling at him to put out their house. At that point, he couldn't. He either needed to go four-houses down or do something else. Once a house gets 20 to 30 percent involved, there's not a lot you can do for them. It's a hard thing to see that emotion.

Mm-hmm.

Ted was down there the first day. He had another very funny story. He was down defending the old Chief's house, Chief Reed down on 1201 Trinity. Chief Reed was still there. He was I guess limping around on a cane or a walker. This guy shows up in an SUV, a firefighter from some other

department, and he tells them, "You guys need to get out of here. You're going to die. You need to get out."

Ted was looking around, and he's thinking to himself, "That guy, he's on an SUV. He doesn't even have water, and we're the ones that are in jeopardy? At least, we have water." That's how firefighters think about things in some ways. If you've got water in your hands, you've got a good chance. Whereas, the poor guy on the bulldozer, he's more defenseless.

So, yeah. If you've got a shovel or water or something, at least you've got something.

So now that you've had your training, you're a firefighter. You're, obviously, sharing something now that's different from how most people think, right?

Yeah.

Is there anything else that you'd share about what you've learned in this training? Now that you've committed to being a firefighter, that changes your idea of what fire is. Anything along those lines?

No. I mean, we talked about how you could seek refuge in certain safety zones and that sort of thing. I don't know if there's anything else that we haven't already touched upon. I mean, I'm sure I'll think of something when you leave. [Laughter]

You can always let me know. So now, what is next with the fire department that you're involved in? Where does fire safety go? We have a Fire Safe Council now that's mostly among residents and bringing an education and grant money to the community for fire preparedness.

What happens now in terms of what the fire department's role is? Is there cleanup? Are we still worried about fuel? We're, obviously, always in fire mode now in California.

Yeah. We're still worried about fuel. Personally, our Mayacamas VFD is now working more closely with Sonoma Valley Fire and Rescue Authority. And the county hasn't really decided what to do with all the little -- I think there are 11 -- volunteer departments. So there's still an organizational element to it that's unknown.

But we are headed towards working more with Sonoma Valley. Two of our guys attended school in Sonoma Valley rather than having to go to the JC. So we do have that partnership if you will.

I think the county's trying to -- I'm not sure. Did you read that they're trying to increase the sales tax to fund more of the fire departments? There might be some things in the works. We're not sure if it's a good idea, a retail tax, but we'll see what happens.

But we do have a good morale at Mayacamas VFD now, and being up to 12 members is great. I feel like we're heading in the right direction.

So all the new people now, there are 12 members on the Mayacamas volunteer fire department?

Total.

Total. So now every one of those 12 is going to the training?

Everyone is going to the drills. There's perhaps one that has not been officially trained yet so he doesn't have a beeper like I have.

So the beeper is the thing you get?

That's how you get your calls. Although now with cell phones, Scotty (Palkoski) has set it up so that I get something to my cell phone as well, which is helpful. So when I'm working and I don't have my beeper, I can see what's going on even though I can't help. That's an interesting element to it.

When I first got the beeper, I listened to the whole county just to practice. But now, I turn it to only Mayacamas.

You can adjust that because you don't want to hear everything?

Yeah. Mayacamas is much quieter than the whole county. [Laughter] In Santa Rosa, sometimes there are three different car accidents at the same time. That's like an orchestra. Whereas, here, not a whole lot is happening.

So your beeper is connected to the entire county?

If I turn it to that channel.

Okay.

And then I turn it to only Mayacamas channel. [Laughs]

You've shared some of this, but how would you answer the question of, "Knowing what you know now, what would you say to others about fire here on the mountain? What would you want people to know regarding local leaders, residents, anything in between?"

Uh-huh. Well, here on the mountain, CalFire comes in and makes an inspection every couple of years and gives you a report, "Here's what you should do." I would say, "Take them up on it. Do the things that they tell you to do."

You mean house-by-house?

House-by-house, yeah. Attend a Fire Safe Council meeting and take their recommendations. I still learn something even though I've been to fire school. I still learn something at the Fire Safe Council meeting.

I'll bet.

If your neighbor's land is the one that's threatening, which in this case is true -- I hadn't cleared that much onto my neighbor's land -- you are allowed to for fire safety. I mean, I think you should ask first, but you are allowed to clear brush on your neighbor's land if it's endangering your home.

That's one thing because my house is up against the property line. That's the uphill side of the house. Though, it's more likely to come from downhill where I cleared it even more aggressively.

I think that's everything.

Anything else that you want to share or that you remember, a story you haven't related, a piece of it that you've thought of?

No, I think we got it all in there.

Okay.

I'll give you a brief tour of this side.

Yeah. I'd love to do that.

You can see where I trimmed out and how it came up.

[Outside tour of property]

[Inaudible due to outdoor background noise]

And that's where I saw the CalFire guys tapping into these tanks and fighting the fire at that house.
That bay tree, right next to the house, was on fire at that point.

[Inaudible due to outdoor background noise]

d material]